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SUBJECT: MALASIAN OPPOSITION PARTIES HOLD FIRST FORMAL
CONVENTION

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR BRIAN D. MCFEETERS, REASON 1.4 (B AN
D D)

Summary and Comment

11. (SBU) Summary. The three main Malaysian opposition parties held their first official joint convention on December 19, agreeing to a core platform of unified party positions and setting their sights on taking over the government during the next general elections. The opposition coalition known as the People's Alliance (PR) had previously been a well-organized but unofficial coalition consisting of the People's Justice Party (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP), and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS). This is the first time the three opposition parties cooperated on conducting a large-scale function that was open to the public, during which they approved a common policy framework which will be the cornerstone of the coalition's campaign to oust the ruling National Front (BN) when elections are held sometime before the end of June 2013. The PR coalition's agreed framework provides clear policies that it would implement should they gain power -- such as increasing oil revenue-sharing with oil-producing states from five to 20 percent -- while debunking the BN's claims that the PR is a collection of squabbling parties that fight more often than they agree.

12. (C) Comment. The importance of unity at the PR convention, including the much-photographed and widely disseminated image of the three opposition leaders holding their joined hands aloft, cannot be overstated. That picture serves to counter the campaign the government-influenced media has waged to undermine the coalition by highlighting the problems between the parties, treating their minor differences as major rifts, and exaggerating the inevitable infighting through selective use of quotes and false rumors. The parties clearly do have different visions for Malaysia, ranging from DAP's quest for race-blind liberal democracy to PAS's ultimate goal, placed on the back burner, of establishing an Islamic state. Even so, the leaders managed to convey that they were on the same page at the convention when they codified their areas of agreement in a lucid charter. For now, cohesion is winning, since the parties are united by their desire to unseat the BN -- whose United Malays National Organization (UMNO) has controlled the government since independence in 1957 -- and establish a more ethical government.

13. (C) Comment continued. The People's Alliance carried out a successful convention but faces an uphill battle. BN strategists have told us the ruling coalition is determined not only to win the next general election -- which Prime Minister Najib will likely not hold until he must in 2013 -- but is also determined to win back a two-thirds majority in Parliament, in part by offering popular reforms. In the

meantime, PR leader Anwar faces a court trial and probable conviction on sodomy charges in early 2010. Still, the very existence of PR as a viable political force, coupled with the emergence of the uncensored and influential blogosphere that helped the opposition get its policy message to the public, has changed the political dynamics in Malaysia. Many of the values that the People's Alliance stresses -- such as accountable government and press freedom -- are in line with U.S. interests. While the opposition has a marked lack of clarity on many major foreign policy issues, it has a tendency toward protectionist rhetoric on trade, and would continue the current government's anti-Israel stance. End Summary and Comment.

Party Leaders Pledge to Work Under One Banner

14. (U) The opposition coalition, called the People's Alliance (Pakatan Rakyat or PR in Malaysian), comprising the People's Justice Party (PKR), the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS) held its first convention on December 19 with the theme of "Guiding change to ensure victory." Polcouns, Poloffs, and diplomats from other embassies attended the convention held in Shah Alam, the capital of the PR-controlled state of Selangor. This is the first time the three parties have come together to formalize the coalition after announcing its formation on April 1, 2008, right after the March 2008 general election. The election, which has been described as a "political tsunami," saw the opposition capture five of thirteen state governments and 47 percent of the popular vote, with the opposition parties winning 82 out of the 222 parliament seats and

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thereby denying the ruling National Front (BN) coalition its customary two thirds majority in parliament. (Note: this is significant because it denies the BN the ability to amend the constitution, an option it frequently used in the past for political advantage. End Note.) Approximately 1,500 delegates from all three parties attended the convention. The three parties recently submitted their application to the Registrar of Societies to formally register as an official political alliance; they are currently awaiting a response from the registrar.

15. (U) After a raucous opening that featured Malay drummers and Chinese dragons, the convention started with speeches by three key leaders representing each of the three opposition parties. PKR Advisor and de facto opposition leader Anwar Ibrahim represented PKR; Penang Chief Minister and DAP party Secretary General Lim Guan Eng represented DAP; and PAS party president Hadi Awang represented PAS. All three leaders pledged their party's commitment to the coalition. Anwar Ibrahim stated that the People's Alliance is not just a political party but "a political movement that will bring about genuine change in the country." He urged the PR component parties to emerge from the "cocoon of their narrow sectarianism" and "to be fair to all the people" if they are serious about defeating the BN in the next general election.

16. (U) DAP Secretary General Lim Guan Eng, to laughter and applause, described the ruling BN as "the dark side" that "oppresses, depresses and suppresses the people forever." Echoing Anwar's call, Guan Eng urged the people to support PR whereby its policies will focus on "justice, freedom, truth, welfare and devotion to God," a clear a message to win over Muslim support. He pointed out that the PR leaders' objective is to "defend the national interest" compared to the BN leaders who only defend "their own self interest." He concluded his speech by pointing out that PR is fighting for the future generation of the country.

17. (U) PAS President Hadi Awang reassured the coalition partners that his party is committed to the People's Alliance, and would never join the BN's dominant party, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO). (Comment: Since

the March 2008 general election, several senior PAS leaders have been promoting the idea of a PAS-UMNO unity government for the sake of Malay and Muslim unity. These PAS leaders who have been advocating this unity government were at the convention, including Hadi himself, indicating that the party is firmly committed to align itself with the PR. End Comment.) In his speech, Hadi quoted extensively examples from the Koran that promoted a plural society based on justice. He stated that in Islam it is cruel to discriminate against minorities, and urged non-Muslims not to take seriously the brand of Islam as promoted by UMNO, which he described as "not holding on to the true teachings and principles" of the religion. The three leaders avoided lashing out at Prime Minister Najib or other BN leaders by name, but Hadi drew applause when he noted that Putra Jaya, the federal capital, was only a few kilometers away from Shah Alam.

Common Platform -- Accountability and Transparency Galore

18. (SBU) Pakatan leaders unveiled a 33-page common policy framework described by a journalist from the BN-influenced "Star" newspaper as "a masterpiece of compromise between three dissimilar political visions" that contained promises of sweeping reforms and equality. The common platform, unanimously adopted by the 1,500 delegates at the end of the convention, has four major points: a transparent and genuine democracy; a high-performance people-centric economy; social justice and human development; and a better federal-state relationship and foreign policy. All three political parties pledged in the common framework to defend the Constitution; to practice needs-based affirmative action (as opposed to the race-based policy practiced by the BN); abolish all laws that violate human rights including the Internal Security Act; and restore and respect the separation of powers between the three branches of government. Other pledges include introducing a minimum wage (Malaysia has none); providing more powers and funds to the states; making the Election Commission, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), Human Rights Commission (Suhakam), National Oil Company Petronas and other major government institutions directly accountable to Parliament, and having Parliament approve the appointment of important government posts such as the inspector general of police, attorney-general, MACC commissioner and auditor-general.

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19. (U) With regard to the contentious issue of religion, the coalition pledged to establish a "comprehensive mechanism" (including forming a royal commission) to resolve cases where there is an overlap of civil and Islamic Syariah laws. On foreign policy, the PR wants to strengthen Malaysia's role in the international arena by promoting a foreign policy that is based on "universal justice, (conflict) resolution through negotiations, and emphasis on inter-civilization dialogues for peace, security and prosperity." The Alliance also wants to strengthen diplomatic and trade relations with regional partners, especially with ASEAN member countries.

10. (SBU) The common platform also made special reference to the East Malaysian States of Sabah and Sarawak, where PR promised to increase the oil royalty from the current five percent to twenty percent (as promised for all other states with oil and gas revenue) and resolving long-standing problems faced by indigenous peoples. PR also promised to form a royal commission to resolve the outstanding issue of illegal immigrants, a major problem in Sabah which has been largely ignored by the federal government. PKR Vice President and prominent Sabah politician Jeffrey Kittingan, rumored to be at odds with PR leader Anwar, told Poloffs that, on the contrary, he was very happy the PR had given special attention to the two East Malaysian states. (Comment: Reaching out to the two East Malaysian states is crucial to PR's bid to wrest federal power from the BN as the

two states command about a quarter of the total number of parliamentary seats but have a tenuous relationship with UMNO which the opposition believes can potentially be exploited. End Comment.)

Differences Still Exist

¶11. (SBU) Despite the euphoria over the unveiling of a common platform, differences exist among the parties. PAS leaders have told us that the party is not abandoning its objective of forming an Islamic state in Malaysia, while DAP leaders are continuing to promote the dismantling of race-based policies and secularization of the government. The parties also are squabbling over representation at the state level. For example, PAS-controlled Kedah does not have a DAP politician in the state cabinet, much to the chagrin of DAP. The reverse is true in the DAP-controlled state of Penang. In Selangor, PAS wants the state government to ban the sale of alcohol in Malay majority neighborhoods, but the PKR and DAP-dominated state government have balked at this suggestion.

¶12. (SBU) The most prominent spat de jour between the parties is the restoration of local elections. Local elections in Malaysia were suspended in 1969 following large-scale race riots and abolished in 1972. Under the status quo, local councilors are appointed by the respective political parties that control the state government. In the run up to the March 2008 general election, opposition parties pledged to restore local elections if elected. However PAS and some PKR leaders opposed the restoration of local elections as they were worried that some local governments would be dominated by non Malays should elections be held openly. To overcome these differences in opinion, PR has decided to postpone and tone down the discussion on restoring local elections, stating that the coalition is committed to "strengthen local government democracy and democratically enhance the competency and effectiveness of the delivery system and guarantee transparency at all levels."

KEITH